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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF:
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by the Reporters sans frontières international, a non-
governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated
in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 January 2002]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the
submitting non-governmental organization(s).



ENG

ERITREA: the only African country without private press

From September 2001, Eritrea turned out to be the country that most stifled free press in the whole of the African continent. There is no independent press anymore and the country's quasi-totality of journalists are either languishing in jail or in exile. Eritrean journalists in the diaspora are organising themselves to re-launch their newspapers from abroad.

Eritrean President Issaias Afwerki is listed by the RSF as one of the "predators" of free press in the world, among many others.

On 18 September 2001, the government ordered the closure of all private titles, thus making Eritrea one of the rare countries without an independent press in the world. To comply with the government's decision, private newspapers announced that day that they were publishing their last edition, until further notice. The following day, no private newspaper came out. The director of public media went on air to explain that "the private media had all the time to correct their mistakes. They jeopardised national unity."

The suspension sine die of the private press occurred concomitantly with the arrest in Asmara of seven former ministers and generals, themselves historic leaders of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), now in power, because they dared to criticise President Afwerki. They were part of the fifteen (15) officials who, in May 2001, publicly called on the head of state to restore a democratic rule in the country. They also accused him of often acting in an "unconstitutional" manner.

Between 18 and 21 September 2001, at least eight journalists working for independent publications were arrested by the police and taken to the so-called "N0 1 Police Station" in Asmara. Other journalists' homes were also raided by the police. The exact motive for these arrests was not made public.

The eight arrested journalists were, Yusuf Mohamed Ali, editor-in-chief of the daily *Tsigenay*, who was already jailed for several weeks in October 2002; Mattewos Habteab, editor-in-chief of *Megaleh*, arrested several times in 2000 and 2001; Medhanie haile and Temesgen Gebreyesus, deputy editor and administrative council member of *Keste Debona* respectively; Emanuel Asrat, editor-in-chief of *Zemen*; David Isaac and Tsehaye Yohannes of the *Setit* newspaper and Seyoum Fsehaye, a freelance photographer.

Moreover, many other journalists simply disappeared, but as it turned out that they have been arrested by the police as well. Among them, Zemenfes Haile, former editor and founder of the daily *Tsigenay*, who has been jailed for more than two years. Aged 30, Haile spent more than a year in the Zara detention camp and is still detained somewhere in the Lowland regions (in the western part of the country).

At the end, many journalists had to flee the country. Milkias Mihretab, editor of *Keste Debona*, and one of his reporters Semere Teazaz, took refuge in Sudan, then to the United States. Milkias Mihretab was detained in deplorable appalling conditions at the end of 2000.

At the end of September, the situation took another dimension ^ in fact an international dimension when the government ordered the Italian Ambassador to leave the country within 72 hours. This decision was taken as a result of protests by the European Union following the arrest of many opposition leaders and journalists and the crack down on the independent press. The ambassador left Eritrea on 2 October. The Belgian presidency of the EU immediately announced that the expulsion would lead to a "re-examination of its relations with Eritrea in

the light the Cotonou agreement". This convention conditions the economic aid given to developing countries on the basis of respect for human rights. On 8 October, all EU countries decided to recall all their ambassadors. Some days later, the Dutch government announced that it had frozen its economic aid to Eritrea.
